AOC

Tuesday, April 30, 2024

Literature

Mythoclasties - on Monique Wittig's *Dans l'arène ennemie*

By **Deborah Ardilli**

Philosopher and translator

Monique Wittig's springtime is in full bloom. Reissues, translations, international conferences, reading evenings, artistic performances, more openly militant meetings: the number of initiatives dedicated to the author of *The Lesbian Body* in France and abroad over the last few years has been countless. The latest addition to this intellectual effervescence is a volume of previously unpublished works edited by Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Mantion.

With a passion that does not exclude rigor, but on the contrary nourishes it, Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Mantion have exhumed thirty-one forgotten or unpublished Wittigian texts, written or published in several languages between 1966 and 1999. Characterized by a variety of registers (manifesto, essay, foreword, open letter, lyrical prose, interview, speech...), the set is enriched by two appendices: an article by Sande Zeig entitled “The Actor As Activator,” important for grasping the issues at stake in the political

theater to which Wittig and Zeig devoted themselves with *The Constant Journey* (1985), and an interview conducted by Wittig herself with Nathalie Sarraute, a major influence on her conception of literature and language.

Saved from the gnawing criticism of mice, these documents offer us a precious opportunity to grasp “in situation,”, in its concrete becoming, the construction of the feminist materialist paradigm in which Wittig inscribes her political lesbianism. Gathered under the title *In the Enemy Arena*, they have just been published by Éditions de Minuit: a remarkable circumstance, if we remember that, since the publication of *Across The Acheron* in 1985, the publishing house of the new novelists had not accepted any other work by the writer under the pretext that the favorable atmosphere of the 1960s had been exhausted.

Stepping into hostile territory

“The Enemy Arena” is an expression used by Wittig in an interview with feminist activist Josy Thibaut in 1979, where her famous metaphor of the Trojan horse (which later gave its title to an important essay in 1984) also appears for the first time. The two images echo each other and sum up the meaning of the Wittigian political, literary, and theoretical project. As Garbagnoli and Mantion point out, it's a question of entering hostile territory, of “breaking and entering to blow up the forms, concepts, and categories that regulate and establish heterosexuality as the only possible social contract.”

Often accused of being an idealist in spite of herself, if not of isolationism, the figure who emerges from *Dans l'arène ennemie* is in fact acutely aware of the fact that there is no real “outside” where one can find permanent shelter. We're on board, so all that's left is to attempt an “internal perforation” of the heterosexual contract and the mythologies embedded in its workings. However, mapping the enemy arena is not a foregone conclusion. Discovering the shifting boundaries of hostile territory step by step, the better to prepare for attack or to get back on track when you realize you've hit a dead end, is the real challenge of the journey that Wittig rightly defines as “constant.” Which is not to say, by the way, “aimless.”

This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the collection compiled by Garbagnoli and Mantion, who do not fail to warn us of the risks associated with the effect of closure that accompanies the passage to posterity. No closure, of course, when you're alive and what needs to be done isn't there yet. The new generation who reread Wittig's audacious work are well aware of what needs to be done: to bring about “another dimension of the human,” to be built on the ashes of the sex class system and its linguistic and cognitive correlate, the gender system. But from the point of view of the front, when you're opening the way, you work “like a mole,” “blind,” “with known elements that are like flashes in the dark” - as Wittig clearly explains in her ars poetica, *The Literary Workshop*.

Readers are thus warned: they must follow the directions in which the lesbian mole has dug, taking care to restore to the past the haphazard contingency of its unfolding. And since it would be ungenerous to compress into a unilinear sequence the multiple

crossings of the fields that punctuate Wittigian trajectory, we'll limit ourselves here to giving a few points of reference.

Loving, writing: in the gap

First, the entry into the literary arena. It is usually dated 1964, the year in which *L'Opoponax* was awarded the Prix Médicis, as if access to writing and consecration within the literary field were one and the same thing. However, this is not the case. Among the rare autobiographical details revealed in these texts, Wittig recounts how, at the age of eleven, she began writing poems to seduce the girl she fell in love with. Loving, writing: in the gap. We can only imagine those green fruits, but it was probably at this point that she was first confronted with the challenge of reappropriating a repertoire of already-worked words and stripping them of their conventional meaning to make them say what they weren't meant to say.

Extracting a new reality from the existing literary landscape is the program that this child of the age of suspicion will pursue throughout her adult life as a reader and writer. Wittig's 1967 essay on *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is one of the earliest texts in the collection. Not only does she track down a homosexual theme in “the most modern of Flaubert's novels”; more importantly, by exempting the writer from Rouen from realist interpretation, Wittig highlights a principle she would later exploit relentlessly in her offensive against the naturalist and falsely objective premises of the straight mind: “How can we fail to think that the alleged objectivity of realism is not perceived by Flaubert as pure subjectivity,” she writes.

If we bear in mind the motivations that led her to write, the efforts required to “unglue” words from their usual connotations, and her

goal of universalizing the minority point of view, we'll better understand the reasons for Wittig's coolness about her work's inclusion in the twentieth-century literary canon. Indeed, questioned on this point in the late 1980s by Alice Jardine, she not only showed modesty by refusing to answer the question. She also points out that a writer “never works in (or to be in) the canon,” adding a warning against the temptation to settle a sociological question by implanting it with her weight in literary criticism, in the form of women's literature or lesbian literature (and the list could go on).

“It's the writing that's important,” she says. Whatever the builders of more inclusive literary canons may say, there's always food for thought in this laconic statement, especially when we consider the ways in which the diversity market contributes to reproducing the myth of the other-different, unable to access the universal, so essential to the ideological functioning of heterosexual society.

“French by birth but not by habit”

A second autobiographical detail worthy of note: at the age of twelve, on the day of her communion, Wittig vowed never to marry. In the post-war French provinces, at a time when Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* had yet to see the light of day, a would-be feminist was born. But there were no words to describe her. And even when they began to take shape, they were not immediately perceived by the readership. When *L'Opoponax* came out, as Wittig points out, much was written about her revolutionary treatment of

the theme of childhood, but very few of the book's admirers noticed that it was a lesbian and feminist childhood.

Things began to change after May '68. Many of the texts collected by Garbagnoli and Mantion paint a vivid picture of the laborious gestation - largely hampered by Antoinette Fouque and the other antifeminists gathered around her in Psychanalyse et politique - of what would become the M.L.F. Wittig's role in its creation is not limited to her literary prefiguration, in 1969, in Les Guérillères. One aspect that is generally under-emphasized, but which emerges clearly from *Dans l'arène ennemie*, is the resolutely internationalist vocation of her feminism.

This vocation came to the fore during the international campaign on behalf of the “three Marias”, prosecuted by the Portuguese fascist dictatorship after the publication of their *Nouvelles lettres portugaises* (*New Portuguese Letters*), which Wittig translated into French with Évelyne Le Garrec and Vera Alves da Nóbrega. After the fall of the regime in April 1974 and the acquittal of the three women, one of them demonstrated ingratitude and a lack of political courage by attacking the feminist movement that had supported her. It's worth reading Wittig's little-known open letter in response, which provides food for thought on the ethical stakes of feminist activism.

Evoking internationalism also reminds us of the importance of transatlantic connections in Wittig's political formation: “French by birth but not by habit,” according to the formula found by Garbagnoli and Mantion on a typescript of Virgil, not preserved in her archives, she began to be, in a way, long before her American exile. Her reading of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, for example, steered her towards a critique of psychoanalysis that would remain

a constant in her thinking. Above all, it was her links with American feminists living in Paris in those years, some of whom were already highly politicized, that enabled her to overcome Fouque's resistance and initiate the first feminist actions in Vincennes in 1970.

1970 was also the year of her meeting, decisive in the development of the feminist materialist paradigm, with the activists of F.M.A. (Féminisme, Marxisme, Action), including Christine Delphy. The meeting was prompted by the publication in *L'Idiot internationale* of the manifesto “Pour un mouvement de libération des femmes,” written by Wittig and co-signed by her sister Gille, Marcia Rothenberg, and Margaret Stephenson. While the manifesto already revealed Wittig's propensity to distance herself from the prevailing leftism and to think in terms of the class struggle between the sexes, the association with Delphy within the revolutionary feminist current of the M.L.F. laid the political foundations for the enterprise that would find a theoretical outlet, in 1977, in the creation of the journal *Questions féministes*.

“I knew the guillotine”

For Wittig, the construction of a revolutionary, materialist, anti-naturalist feminism goes hand in hand with the definition of a lesbian political point of view that places the critique of the heterosexual political regime at its core. What's more, the affirmation of a lesbian political point of view was, in her eyes, the necessary condition for the women's liberation movement to maintain its revolutionary momentum. Particularly after the publication of *The Lesbian Body*, she kept repeating that

“heterosexuality is sick,” that the heterosexual relationship is the “fossil” site where women's oppression and dependence are endlessly repeated, that the “fear of cutting oneself off from other women” in the name of which the lesbian point of view is censored “is unfounded” and that, on the contrary, the greatest danger is that of “encapsulation,” as the system “absorbs a radical struggle by making concessions on superficial points.”

The difficulty of getting this message across became clear to her and was the main reason why she left for the United States in the mid-1970s. In a prophetic interview with *Actuel* in 1974, she prognosticated: “I sometimes think that in ten years' time the women's movement will have sunk to the bottom, for lack of fighters, determination or long-term objectives.” In 1979, following a coup de force by Antoinette Fouque, “M.L.F.” became a registered trademark with the Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle (French National Institute of Industrial Property): a remarkable fallback for someone who had opposed feminism by calling it “bourgeoisWhen, in 1980, the *Questions Féministes* collective broke up over the issue of lesbianism, all the conditions were ripe for Wittig to write the parable of revolution betrayed that would become “Paris-la-politique”. In 1999, when this short story was published in the collection *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* (P.O.L.), Wittig declared in an interview with Claire Devarrieux - the third autobiographical landmark worth highlighting - “j'ai connu la guillotine” (I've been to the guillotine): a bitter assessment of her Parisian years, her journey through the feminist arena.

Rereading Wittig's version of the end of *Questions féministes*, in the text entitled “Les questions féministes ne sont pas des questions

lesbiennes" (1983), one wonders whether the stern indictment she entrusts to these pages should be read as a repudiation of materialist feminism. Interpreters wishing to bring Wittig into the 21st century unburdened by the legacy she nonetheless continued to claim in her now-canonical book *The Straight Mind* (1992), might indeed make the strategic choice to stop there. But, in the flagrant absence of new institutions that could attest to the objective and subjective collapse of the patriarchal and heterosexual order, the point of subjecting her to such a weight-loss cure remains to be demonstrated. Wittig, for her part, did not hesitate to say, in an interview with Catherine Écarnot in 1996, that "lesbianism is a rupture with an economic system: heterosexuality, certainly not with the feminist movement". Perhaps she was thinking of a feminist movement to come, capable of not succumbing to the multiple pressures of the straight mind.

So, let's make no mistake: there's nothing archaeological, but everything political, in the rediscovery of Monique Wittig. It's a safe bet that more than one person will reach the last page of *The Enemy Arena* thinking "in her I still live" [1].

Deborah Ardilli

Philosopher and translator